



# CITY OF HOUSTON

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Mayor

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March 25, 2021

The Honorable Chris Paddie  
Chairman, House State Affairs Committee  
P.O. Box 2919  
Austin, TX 78768

Re: House Bill 1925

Dear Chairman Paddie and Members of the House State Affairs Committee,

Although homelessness in the greater Houston area has decreased significantly since 2011, there has been a densification of homelessness, especially in highly visible, public places leading to the development of encampments.

This is due to a few reasons: (1) a broad national trend impacting every city, coast to coast; (2) increasing development in Houston leaving fewer undeveloped areas for individuals experiencing homelessness to hide and reside; and (3) TxDot no longer filing or enforcing trespass affidavits on its property, allowing encampments to rise underneath overpasses and raised highways.

For the City of Houston, this issue is not about the visibility of encampments, but rather the public health and safety issues created by encampments, especially impacting those living within the camps.

The City of Houston is at the forefront in developing strategies to not just manage but solve the problem of encampments effectively and holistically. Through the city's efforts to reduce homelessness and encampments specifically, many lessons have been learned.

The first is that when people are not allowed on certain land, they will just move to another piece of land, whether it is public or private, becoming a cat and mouse game (and an ineffective strategy to reduce homelessness). Laws alone will not magically get rid of homelessness or encampments. Instead of just constantly moving people around, Houston solves the issue by housing individuals along with supportive services. In fact, just this year, we have successfully decommissioned several encampments by housing more than 90% of the encampment's residents. In general, these individuals wanted housing and have stayed housed. The encampments did not return, we avoided displacing these individuals onto private property or other public lands, and we saved vital taxpayer dollars.

Second, we have discovered that it is important to have a carrot and a stick approach, offering housing and services repeatedly while also giving a deadline to decommission the

encampment, further incentivizing the housing and services being offered. However, this bill is all “stick,” which in our experience has not worked to reduce homelessness or encampments. Rather, this bill should also provide the “carrot” of housing resources and funding to offer alternative housing options (with services).

Additionally, this bill is very broad, criminalizing all individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. It goes far beyond encampments, to include persons using a blanket, bed roll, or sleeping bag on all public property in the entire state, effectively criminalizing homelessness. This begs the question, where can individuals experiencing homelessness exist? Respectfully, we believe this bill goes far beyond addressing the public health and safety issues created by encampments.

We are also concerned about the cost-shifting implications of this legislation. A local entity that “intentionally violates” Section 364.002 of this bill shall be denied state grant funds for the following fiscal year. The bill also allows the Attorney General of Texas recover expenses including court costs, attorney’s fees, investigative costs, witness fees and deposition costs from the municipality under Section 364.003. We believe those provisions to be ill-conceived and heavy-handed approach will set Houston back significantly in its nationally and internationally recognized efforts to house individuals experiencing homelessness.

The City of Houston recognizes that encampments are an issue that needs to be addressed. In our experience, this bill doesn’t solve or effectively manage the issue. As we mentioned earlier, the solution needs to have both a carrot and a stick. This bill should include funding and resources to help house and transition these individuals out of encampments and off the streets, otherwise it will just push these individuals elsewhere, waste critical law enforcement resources, and not solve the problem.

Sincerely,

Marc Eichenbaum  
Mayor's Office for Homeless Initiatives